

“#IfTheyGunnedMeDown” Video Transcript

Brooke Gladstone

Host, “On the Media,” NPR

The beauty of social media is that it gives instant commentary and reaction to the press coverage.

There was, to me, just a stunningly brilliant hashtag campaign that followed the posting of menacing pictures of Michael Brown called #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. In other words, which picture of me would they use? Would they use the one of me in my marine uniform or the one of me in my hoodie? You know, would they use the picture of me in my business suit or in my disco dress? And so on and so forth.

Larry Morris

Webster University Graduate Student

This is an issue that African Americans have had with the media for a very long time. It is nothing new. It's not exclusive to St. Louis, Baltimore, Watts, any place there's been riots. When you see pictures of African Americans or black Americans, whatever you may choose, it's always in a light that's negative. So #IfTheyGunnedMeDown was just to highlight [that].

Like me, I have my Bachelor's degree and I'm working on my Master's degree. Now, I don't really post a lot of pictures of me doing anything unsavory, but I have friends that will catch me in the moment. What are you going to put up of me? Because image is everything. A picture is a thousand words. If the first thing you see is me with a red cup in my hand and a bottle of vodka, you're going to automatically make the assumption, “Well, he likes to party it up. He's crazy.” But you know, you wouldn't know that I've been trained in certain things, that I'm involved in my community, and that's what that whole movement was about.

How would they depict me? What would they pick and it was just very, very strong, it was a very strong sentiment that the way that they did it was wrong. But, like you said, some people would be like, “They were showing him from what he really is.” Well, nobody's perfect.

Yamiche Alcindor

Reporter, *USA Today* (2011–2015)

#IfTheyGunnedMeDown was a great hashtag, because I think it allowed people in the media to really understand what people were thinking when they see these photos and make . . . kind of understand the complexity that goes into kind of choosing photos and choosing how you define someone and choosing how you really tell the world about someone.

As reporters, we're up against deadlines, we're up against word limits, we're up against all this stuff that's kind of making me try to simplify a story. And I think the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown made me think, even as we simplify, even as we try to tell people stories in 500 words, try to get more of who that person was.

Jean Buchanan

Assistant Managing Editor, St. Louis Post-Dispatch

We had one of Michael Brown in his cap and gown that we used a few times. There is a certain segment of the population that was furious every time we used it, 'cause, you know, "Michael Brown's a thug" and here we are showing him in a cap and gown.

You know, people are many things. Kids pose, they do stupid things. I think you have to be really careful when you're using photos of children and, you know, are you presenting this 13-year-old as a "thug"? I mean, he's a kid, so I just think you have to be really careful with what you do.

I think it's really important that news organizations just be fair and try to be neutral when they choose photos of people, particularly victims in crimes. And perpetrators in crimes.

David Carson

Photographer, St. Louis Post-Dispatch

We had a situation here in St. Louis where a gentleman had—VonDerrit Myers—had a run-in with police and it ended up being a fatal shooting by the police officer who shot him.

The family contends VonDerrit did not have a gun. The police investigation showed—and I think accurately showed—that VonDerrit did have a gun and was firing back at the police officer that was chasing him.

I think it's credible in this case that VonDerrit had a gun and one of the reasons why I say it's credible is that if you looked on social media, there are photos of VonDerrit holding the stolen gun that was recovered at the scene days before that—that were posted to social media days before that—and we ran with that picture.

We ran that picture in the paper because I think that picture with VonDerrit holding a gun, and it was the stolen gun that was recovered at the scene, was an important piece of the story that was going on here. It sort of backed up and provided validity to what the police said—that they recovered this gun. It would be very hard to reproduce and fake ahead of time.

People got mad about us choosing that picture with VonDerrit with the gun, but it had been circulated on social media even before we chose it. It's not the only representation of him that we put out. We also used a mug shot of him. But it is part of this story now. Now there are people saying you're slandering his name. I don't think we're slandering his name. This really happened, this is a picture that he and his friends had posted on social media. This is how they were portraying themselves at that particular time.

Kenya Vaughn

Reporter, St. Louis American

As an African American person, we have this certain way that we intentionally or organically idealize a person that they've passed away. It's just kind of what we do as people. We want to showcase the best part of them.

But people always say, "Well, if it bleeds it leads" or "the more sensational, the more hits." But we kind of incorporate a sense of social responsibility in our reporting and that goes into selecting photos as well. This is my personal policy: as a human being, what would I want the last photo of my child or my nephew or my niece or something to be? I have the fortunate liberty to be part of an aspirational, advocacy-type news organization where I have that liberty to do that. Not everyone does, but at the same time it's like, as a human being what would I want somebody to have as a last picture of me?

Brooke Gladstone

Host, "On the Media," NPR

In the day, when a reporter was on the bumper beat, and they were going to get a picture of the victim, generally they let the family choose. That was almost always the case. You know if somebody was gunned down by, you know, some crazy gunman, or even was caught in a crossfire, or for whatever reason, out of respect for the family, they would let the family choose the picture.

David Carson

Photographer, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

With social media, things are different because people are publishing photos of themselves online that are accessible and people can find and sometimes digital organizations are finding the photographs on their own without going through the family.

There's always a debate there about what photo you're going to use to represent people and I think that's also important for people to remember that these things they post on social media can be seen by many people and images are a powerful thing and they can change how you're perceived.

I don't know what the answer to that is.

Yamiche Alcindor

Reporter, *USA Today*

The solution, as you said, is you're kind of open to bias no matter what picture you choose. Likely you're probably going to have one picture in the newspaper—I work for a newspaper. In broadcast or online you might have multiple pictures. So I think that for one, as news organizations, we should probably strive for multiple pictures of somebody. We've seen multiple pictures of Trayvon Martin, we've seen multiple pictures of Michael Brown. It's best, I think, to use multiple pictures of someone.

But I think if you have one picture to deal with, I think, one, it should probably come from the family if it's something that's relevant and something that's kind of recent. But I also think that it should also be relevant to what was going on at the time. So, if you were a veteran five years ago, but only last year this picture was taken of you kind of hanging out at the beach, I might use the five-year picture, but the most relevant picture and the most recent picture is you on the beach.

Brooke Gladstone

Host, "On the Media," NPR

Everything conveyed by a picture, and the picture selected via an unconscious bias, a bias that will confirm what it is you think you really understand about a situation that you really don't understand at all.

Student Notes

Student Notes (continued)